

Actresses ‘of a certain age’ thrive in juicy roles on Toronto stage

NORA McLELLAN AND NANCY BEATTY, APPEARING IN ANNIE BAKER’S *JOHN*, LOOK TO YOUNG PLAYWRIGHTS TO DEFY STEREOTYPES.



Photo by Nick Kozak for The Toronto Star

Actor Nora McLellan remembers reading the character descriptions in George Bernard Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* while appearing in a production of the play. One read: “Old disreputable braggart of a woman — 44.”

Last summer, McLellan, who is now in her 60s, played a role in a sex comedy by Mark Crawford called *The Birds and the Bees* at the traditionally straitlaced Blyth Festival. “He wrote a part for a woman my age and he told me, ‘I want you to be naked and I want you having sex.’ Of course at Blyth, they were scandalized into the highest-selling show. The audience was shocked,” McLellan recalls.

McLellan is the kind of performer who processes the present through the lens of the past, with roles such as Mrs. Warren but also Hagar in *The Stone Angel*, Violet in *August: Osage County*, Aunt Eller in *Oklahoma!*, Mrs. Tottendale in *The Drowsy Chaperone* and Mama Rose in *Gypsy*.

She speaks from the dressing room she shares with another actor euphemistically referred to as “of a certain age,” Nancy Beatty. Beatty, a four-time Dora Award winner who works in both Toronto and London, can relate to the idea of desexualizing older generations.

As she was preparing to play a 90-year-old Georgia O’Keeffe in Tarragon Theatre’s *The Faraway Nearby* in 1995, Beatty took an 86-year-old friend out for lunch. “I said, ‘So what about sex? Is that still happening?’ And she just looked at me, she was shocked. ‘Well, of course!’ That’s how dumb I was,” Beatty says.

Thankfully, both Beatty and McLellan feel that options for senior actresses (though McLellan hates that term) are expanding, as playwrights young and old fill in the gaps in representation that have persisted throughout theatre history.

Case in point, both McLellan and Beatty have arguably two of the juiciest roles on a Toronto stage right now in *John*, by American playwright Annie Baker, which closes Sunday in its Canadian premiere by the Company Theatre.

In a production well reviewed by critics across the city, Beatty and McLellan deliver standout performances as, respectively, the religious and soft-spoken owner of a small-town American B&B, Mertis, and her 85-year-old blind best friend Genevieve, who briefly believed she was possessed by her ex-husband.

While Baker doesn’t make these characters overtly sexual, she doesn’t dismiss it either (Mertis found a second husband late in life; Genevieve talks about how her mental illness affected her body). In her hyperrealistic style, Baker gives the characters incredible depth and mystery. That mystery is what made Beatty take the role.

“Sometimes you know, when you read a play you can find a way in. There was none of that. It was completely fascinating to me, because it wasn’t like anything else I had ever read,” she says.

By dropping subtle hints throughout the play’s three and a half hours, Baker outlines the histories of these two

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women like a connect-the-dots image. The impression of full lives vaguely appears and they're strange, sometimes very dark, but they also share a truly genuine and lovely friendship.

(After sex past 60, the next frontier of senior relationships to explore might be friendship and camaraderie that goes beyond sharing tea and watching soap operas.)

The fullness of these characters — and their imagined pain, joy and struggle — beautifully contrasts with the younger B&B guests, Jenny (Loretta Yu) and Elias (Philip Riccio), going through a rough patch in their relationship. The intensity of their interactions isn't downplayed in either Baker's script or Jonathan Goad's direction but, compared to the figures of Mertis and Genevieve, their problem feels temporary.

Both Mertis and Genevieve have primary traits that one would associate with older generations: Mertis is a caretaker, Genevieve is wise. But they're far from the stock characters that actors may feel trapped inside of as they get older.

"For years now you've been hearing about Helen Mirren and Judi Dench talking about how hard it was to find good parts for women," Beatty says. "So when you get to your 60s, you're constantly asking yourself the question, 'Do I fit in?' And 'What does it mean to fit in, in terms of age?' You don't know if it's systemic or if you just have too many wrinkles for television.

"But in some ways I think it is getting better because we've got a lot more female playwrights, lots more coming up."

McLellan makes a point about not complaining — "I'm always happy wherever I am onstage" — but with young playwrights such as Crawford and Baker as examples, who are in their 30s, she's hopeful roles for senior actresses will continue to defy stereotypes.

"I'm feeling extremely powerful. I think we're just, as women, as actors, we're coming into a good place of having the technique and the excitement," she says. "I personally could work every day of my life."